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Lincoln produce auction draws interest of state ag officials

By **BRENDA S. EDWARDS**

brenda@amnews.com



Buyers and sellers gather Wednesday for the Lincoln County Produce Auction near Crab Orchard. (Clay Jackson photo)



CRAB ORCHARD - Steve Shepperson comes to just about every sale at the Lincoln County Produce Auction.

"There's a lot of good stuff here today," he said Wednesday. "You'd have to go to California to find anything as good. People take pride here."

Shepperson, of Boyle County, brings late flowering plants from his greenhouse in the Forkland community and helps load and unload produce at the auction on Ky. 39 north of Crab Orchard.

Spectators flock to the produce auction three times a week for a variety of reasons. Some bring fresh produce to sell; others come to buy it. People also come just to look and talk and eat delicious food at the concession stand.

Linda Fraley has been buying at the Lincoln auction for three years for her roadside produce market in Memphis, Ind.

"I know it's always fresh. I try to go to states that have the freshest produce," said Fraley. "This is about as fresh as it gets."

Missy Houston, of London, comes just about every week. She was with a friend and cattle trailer full of produce Wednesday. "I enjoy coming and looking at all the stuff, and eating," she said.

An Amish woman serves up burgers, sandwiches, hot dogs and ice cream sundaes.

Producers looking for alternatives

David Neville, an auctioneer in Shelby and Henry counties, had the opportunity to make the first sale at Wednesday's auction. He sold a watermelon in a practice run before the auction began.

Billy Bryant auctions off fruit and vegetables at the Lincoln County Produce Auction. (Clay Jackson photo)

"I'm looking for other opportunities to auction," said Neville, a cattle producer who came with a tour group. The trip was organized by the state Department of Agriculture's marketing office to acquaint growers and producers with auctions.

"We have a lot of producers looking for alternatives, and I wanted to have a look here," said Neville.

Lloyd Shrock, manager of the Lincoln County Produce Auction, explained the process earlier in the day to the ag officials.

Roger Snell, staff assistant with the Office of Agriculture Marketing and Product Promotion, is looking at ways to market produce in urban areas. He and John Morris, account manager for Allie Food Marketers in Louisville, are working with grocers to make it easier for retailers to support the Kentucky Proud program.

Snell said Kentucky produce is sold mostly to family-operated groceries like Value Market and IGA. Wal-Mart also buys local produce.

"They want to support Kentucky producers and farmers."

However, more producers are needed to support the market demands.

"This (auction) opens up the possibilities to get into these markets," said Snell. "The quality of the items is fantastic. They are picked this morning, sold this afternoon and in the store later today.

"We want to make a sales pitch with Kentucky grocery stores," Snell said.

State wants to tap into markets

Morris works with the state ag department to promote Kentucky produce. "Our objective is to sell as much Kentucky agriculture produce as we can and to make it easier to sell and buy."

Customers definitely ask for and respond to produce that is grown in Kentucky, but the state has not been able to tap into this in a big way.

"We want to get people from the grocery industry to see the quality of this stuff," Snell said.

Information about the produce auction will be taken to the Kentucky Proud Expo at the Kentucky Grocers Association convention later this year in northern Kentucky.

"Many retailers don't know this place exists," said Snell.

Although the dry weather this summer has been extensive, Shrock expects to hit the million dollar mark with produce sold at the market.

"The reputation of the auction is growing and they (Amish auction company) are hoping to get into the Chicago market soon," said Snell.

The Amish are very organized with produce auctions, Snell said. He said of the four produce auctions in

the state, two are operated by the Amish.

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